

A PARENT'S GUIDE FOR PREVENTING GANGS

Many communities have serious problems with gangs. There are many kinds of gangs, but whatever kind you are dealing with, gangs spell trouble. They cause fear, destroy property, threaten or hurt peaceable residents, and drive out businesses.

Parents can do a lot to prevent gang problems or to reduce gang problems already in place. Most important, there's a lot that parents can do to keep their own children from joining gangs:

- Learn about gangs and signs of gang activity
- Sharpen your skills as a parent and use them
- Join with others to make or keep your neighborhood gang free

LEARN ABOUT GANGS

Young people (as young as nine or ten) join gangs for reasons that make sense to them, not to adults. These are just some of the reasons they give:

- to belong to a group
- for excitement
- to get protection
- to earn money
- to be with friends

Gangs leave signs of their presence. Your child may adopt some of those signs as either a gang member or an imitator:

- specific colors or emblems
- special hand signals
- gang symbols on walls as graffiti or on books or clothing
- major and negative behavior changes such as:
 - lowering grades in school
 - staying out without good reason
 - "hanging" with known or suspected gang members
 - carrying weapons
- wearing certain kinds and colors of clothing in very specific ways
 - Red or blue bandanas hanging from either left or right rear pockets
- possessing unexplained, relatively large sums of money

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS AS A PARENT

Many gang members say they joined because the gang offered them support, caring, and a sense of order and purpose. (The things most parents try to give their kids). The odds are that the better you meet these needs, the less need your children will see for gangs. Here are some parenting skills that are especially important:

- Talk with listen to your child. Spend some special time with each child
- Put a high value on education and help your child to do his or her best in school. Do everything possible to prevent dropping out
- Help your kids identify positive role models and heroes - especially people right in your community
- Do everything possible to involve your children in supervised, positive group activities
- Praise them for doing well and encourage them to do their very best - to stretch their skills to the utmost
- Know what your children are doing and whom they are with. Know about their friends and their friends' families

Don't forget to talk about gangs. The best time is before there's a major problem. Tell your child that

- you disapprove of gangs
- you don't want to see your child hurt or arrested
- you see your child as special, and worth protecting
- you want to help your child with problems
- family members don't keep secrets from each other, and
- you and other parents are working together against gangs

Don't forget to listen to your child

HELP KEEP (OR PUT) GANGS OUT

Everyone (except gang members) wants a gang-free community. Parents stand to lose the most - the well being or even the life of a child if gangs take or keep hold. But gangs are often violent and intimidating.

What can you do in the face of this?

First, develop positive alternatives. Are there after-school and weekend activities kids can enjoy? Can the school offer its facilities? Can parents organize clubs or sports? Can older kids tutor or mentor younger ones? Can the kids themselves help with ideas?

Second, talk with other parents. For one thing, you'll find out what everyone else's parent really said. For another, you can support each other and share knowledge that will help spot problems sooner than you can on your own.

Third, work with the Sheriff's Office and other agencies. Report suspicious activity, set up a Neighborhood Watch or a community patrol; let the Sheriff's Office know about gang graffiti, get (and share with other parents) the facts on the gang problem in your community.

Fourth, get organized against the gang organization. Use your neighborhood association or a civic group. Get help from a variety of sources right in your community. Try these kinds of people in addition to the Sheriff's Office, priest or minister, family counselor, community association, school counselor or principal, athletic coach, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA, Scouts, drug abuse prevention groups, youth-serving agencies, and community centers - just to name a few.